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# NATO's Deterrence Requirements and the Next Strategic Concept: A German Perspective by Klaus Wittmann; Strategic Insights, v. 8, issue 4 (September 2009)



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## NATO's Deterrence Requirements and the Next Strategic Concept: A German Perspective

Strategic Insights, Volume VIII, Issue 4 (September 2009)

by [Klaus Wittmann](#)

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With such eminent experts participating and the three subjects (deterrence requirements, risk-and responsibility-sharing, and arms control and disarmament) so inextricably linked, I asked myself what my specific contribution might be, and I agreed with Professor Yost that I would focus on the question "How should NATO's new Strategic Concept deal with nuclear policy, strategy and weapons?"

I do this from the perspective of an officer who, as I can say in all modesty, in January 1990 was the first who dared to write on NATO paper the recommendation to revise MC 14/3. I then acted as Chairman of the Military Strategy Working Group (MSWG) which developed the military input to NATO's 1991 Strategic Concept and its accompanying document MC 400. The present discussion often reminds me of that time, when people warned that we must be careful not to "open Pandora's box," and I replied: "It is already open, haven't you noticed?" In 1998-1999, I was as a negotiator on the German side, involved in the development of the new Strategic Concept agreed to at the 50-year anniversary summit in Washington.<sup>[1]</sup>

From that double experience I draw the moral right and even obligation to participate in the debate about a new Strategic Concept, which I would have regarded as due already for the 60-year summit at Strasbourg/Kehl in April 2009, and for which I had laid out some ideas in an essay for the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung as early as July 2007.<sup>[2]</sup>

However, that is not the only perspective from which I look at this subject. I also do it as a military officer to whom it brings back many reminiscences because, as a battery commander, brigade logistics officer and battalion commander, I was concretely involved in German defense preparations, having previously served in the nuclear artillery as a cadet and lieutenant. At the Artillery School I once participated in a "nuclear effects advisors" course, and later I had an SAS (special ammunition site) to guard with my battalion. Increasingly "MAD" appeared to me as the fitting abbreviation for "mutually assured destruction," I also remember presenting a book three years ago at the German Military History Institute: Bruno Thoß' important work about the link between Alliance strategy and German security interests in the fifties and sixties.<sup>[3]</sup> This brought back the worries about a "battlefield Germany," where operations accompanied by nuclear employment would have thoroughly destroyed much of what was to be protected against an invasion or to be conquered back. The author called this an "operational dilemma," and I said it was much more, namely the core problem. (He mentioned the maneuver simulation "Flash Back," in which in the CENTAG region 40 NATO and 170 Soviet All this was only justified because of

the nuclear weapons were employed.) fundamental value of freedom and the faith in the war-preventing function of deterrence.

I also look at this as a German. This has to do with the last point, but also with Germany's special status regarding its renunciation of nuclear weapons. This should indeed not be a reason for complacency or for a one-dimensional focus on disarmament, as Michael Rühle has just recently reminded the German political class.<sup>[4]</sup>

Furthermore, the subject must interest me as someone active in the security policy debate in the public domain and for eight years responsible for higher officer education at the national and international levels.

Finally, my perspective is also influenced by the fact that I am the only military member of the Kammer für Öffentliche Verantwortung (KÖV), the "Advisory Committee for Public Responsibility" which advises the Council of the Protestant Church of Germany (EKD) in all political matters, and which in October 2007 finalized a fundamental document on peace ethics and security policy questions. The first such document since 1981, it was entitled "Live from God's Peace—Care for Just Peace," and received a widespread public response.<sup>[5]</sup> At Professor Yost's specific request I will tell you more about it, because here the difficulties of public diplomacy and strategic communication with regard to our general conference topic are perhaps more apparent than anywhere else.

So, in sum, I am more a practitioner than a nuclear "theologian". And I am quite concerned with what the concept paper for this conference describes very well as "the challenge of reconciling the continuing need for nuclear deterrence arrangements with the political imperative to pursue visible and substantive measures in nuclear arms control, disarmament, and proliferation."<sup>[6]</sup>

On the work towards a new Strategic Concept, a few general remarks may be useful, which are informed not least by my experience with the former two—but particularly the first one in 1991, because the "revision" in 1998-1999 was a rather cautious one, responding to the very conservative and restrictive remit merely to "review and where necessary adapt" the existing document.

This time I think that the following aspects are of importance:

- A "clean sheet approach" should be pursued, which does not exclude taking on board what is still valid in the extant Strategic Concept. This does not mean radically changing everything, but on the other hand it does mean doing more than just editing and wordsmithing.
- Before any drafting, much homework must be done as a prerequisite. This means that Allies have to come to terms with the differences that divide them. Against the warning that developing a new Strategic Concept will be "a very divisive process" I can only ask: Are we not so divided on many counts that a "uniting endeavour" is urgently needed?
- Important subjects for the new Strategic Concept— and for, first, re-establishing strategic consensus—are: redefining the purpose and role of NATO; a strengthened Transatlantic link; a new balance between Article 5 and the expeditionary orientation; more efficient cooperation with the EU; a new base for NATO's relationship with Russia; harmonized views about today's security challenges, including some newer ones such as global terrorism, cyber security, piracy, energy security and the question of NATO's involvement in all these; furthermore: Partnership issues, enlargement, NATO's regional vs. global character—and, of course, the nuclear issues, underpinned, in my view, by a more conceptual discussion on the role of military force in the 21st century.

- Already the process of harmonizing views among Allies while working towards a new Strategic Concept would contribute to convincing the public of the continuing need for deterrence.
- Regarding the method I think back to the MSWG, which in 1990-1991 had to do very innovative, creative work. Food-for-thought papers (“point papers”) were produced for topics where innovative thinking was required. Those included themes such as future risks, crisis management, force build-up capability, multinationality, reinforcement options, future tasks of armies, navies and air forces, flexibility, sustainability, cooperative security, arms control, and nuclear policy. These papers were drafted, discussed, offered to the national capitals and, on the basis of instructions, discussed again and amended. When they appeared sufficiently “mature,” they were, without seeking time-consuming final consensus, passed to the Strategy Review Group (SRG) on the political side of the Headquarters. Much of the innovative content of the 1991 Strategic Concept was produced in this fashion.
- Many of the subjects mentioned above as important for the new Strategic Concept would lend themselves to such a process. In addition, in 1990-1991, the North Atlantic Council conducted so-called “NAC brainstorming sessions” on individual topics.

As for the nuclear issues: In 1990-1991 they had to be seriously discussed, but in 1998-1999 the Allies anxiously avoided proposals to “open the bag” and decided to mainly use the language from the 1991 Strategic Concept. The attempts by two governments (Canada and Germany, the latter with its just-installed “red-green”—that is, SPD-Green—coalition) to introduce a “no-first-use” policy were unsuccessful, but reinforced this caution.

This time it will not be possible to avoid a profound debate for various reasons:

- Doubts about the continuing validity and effectiveness of deterrence with suicide bombers striving for death, as the discussion often goes;
- Proliferation and the threatening breakdown of the NPT regime;
- Iran's nuclear ambitions and its successful procrastination with the international community;
- The concrete arms control initiatives announced by the new U.S. administration;
- The vision of a nuclear-weapon-free world (proclaimed by the two “gangs of four”; Kissinger with Shultz, Perry and Nunn, and then his friend Helmut Schmidt with Weizsäcker, Genscher and Bahr);<sup>[7]</sup>
- Finally, President Obama embracing and supporting this vision (who, however, made provisos, saying that he would probably not see this happen in his lifetime, and that, as long as nuclear weapons existed, the United States would keep a safe, secure and effective arsenal);<sup>[8]</sup>
- Also, in Germany, the debate has started again after President Obama's April 2009 announcement. Jumping on this train, several politicians have asked that the U.S. nuclear bombs stored in Germany for use by German TORNADOs be withdrawn—as if advance concessions of this kind could bring forward negotiations about the much higher numbers on the Russian side. This raises the whole question of “nuclear participation,” which the Federal Government thought it had put to rest when an inconspicuous affirmative note had been inserted in the *2006 Defence White Book*.<sup>[9]</sup>

In the 1999 Strategic Concept, NATO addressed nuclear policy and strategy in the last part of the document, where the subject was almost hidden in the chapter “Guidelines for the Alliance's Forces,” and there in the sub-chapter on the “Alliance's Force Posture,” with the headline “Characteristics of Nuclear Forces.” There the following aspects are addressed:

- The fundamentally political purpose of the nuclear forces of the Allies: “to preserve peace and prevent coercion and any kind of war. They will continue to fulfill an essential role by

ensuring uncertainty in the mind of any aggressor about the nature of the Allies' response to military aggression. They demonstrate that aggression of any kind is not a rational option;"[10]

- The nuclear forces of the United States, the United Kingdom and France and their contribution "to the overall deterrence and security of the Allies;"[11]
- The need, as a "demonstration of Alliance solidarity and common commitment to war prevention," for "widespread participation by European Allies involved in collective defense planning in nuclear roles, in peacetime basing of nuclear forces on their territory and in command, control and consultation arrangements," with "nuclear forces based in Europe and committed to NATO" as "an essential political and military link between the European and the North American members of the Alliance;"[12]
- The maintenance by the Alliance of "adequate nuclear forces in Europe," which "need to have the necessary characteristics and appropriate flexibility and survivability, to be perceived as a credible and effective element of the Allies' strategy in preventing war," and which "will be maintained at the minimum level sufficient to preserve peace and stability."[13]
- It is reiterated that "the circumstances in which any use of nuclear weapons might have to be contemplated" by Allies are "extremely remote," and the reduction and re-targeting steps taken by NATO thus far are recalled. That is, "NATO's nuclear forces no longer target any country."[14]

Much of this is still valid. But NATO must be conscious of the increased difficulty to address—to use the formulation from the concept paper once more—"the challenge of reconciling the continuing need for nuclear deterrence arrangements with the political imperative to pursue visible and substantive measures in nuclear arms control, disarmament, and proliferation."

Before I talk about the issues to be discussed and to be reflected in the new Strategic Concept, let me come back to my example with the Protestant Church Advisory Commission because it particularly well illustrates this difficulty—and I can tell you that participating there as the only soldier did not always carry an amusement tax.

The intense discussion over three years resulted in the EKD (Protestant Church of Germany) Peace Memorandum "Live From God's Peace—Care For Just Peace"—where on the one hand I "lost," because in its condemnation of nuclear weapons the Committee, and then the Council of the Protestant Church, went further than in previous times:

109) Ethical judgments about nuclear weapons have always been controversial in German Protestantism. Yet faced with the system of nuclear deterrence that emerged between NATO and the Warsaw Pact following the Second World War, the peace ethics of most West German Protestant churches recognized "participation in the attempt to safeguard peace in freedom by the presence of nuclear weapons as still being a possible Christian way of acting today." During the Cold War, it was assumed that rational consideration of the risks by both sides would protect against the outbreak of a nuclear war. Deterrence requires an opponent who is susceptible to rational calculation, and that can no longer be taken for granted today. In this context, the arguments against deterrence have become significantly stronger. (...)

And, later in the document it is stated that:

(162) (...) The suitability of nuclear deterrent strategy has now become questionable (see above ...). From the point of view of Protestant peace ethics, the nuclear weapons threat can today no longer be seen as a legitimate means of self-defence. This statement consciously represents a peace ethics position that—in a changed historical context—differs from that set out in Thesis VIII of the Heidelberg Theses of 1959 (see above ...).

That is where I “lost.” But I insisted on the following:

There is still not agreement, however, as to what political and strategic conclusions are to be drawn from this agreed peace ethics position.

The “pacifist” school then said:

(163) According to one argument, one side's threat, as a necessary component of deterrence, is a consequence of its perception of the readiness of another country's weapons potential, and thus leads to a vicious cycle of reciprocal perceived threat. In the interests of the credibility of the deterrent principle, it has never been possible to separate the political function of nuclear weapons from the operational planning that—if deterrence fails—also foresees nuclear war. All experience suggests that deterrence is necessarily linked with further nuclear armament, rearmament and weapons modernization, which also includes new missile technologies. The disarmament obligations resulting from the NPT are still undermined if modernization is effected on the basis of reduced weapons potential. If the traditional nuclear powers do not take compliance with their disarmament obligations seriously, the NPT regime as a whole is jeopardized. In the affected governments and populations, double standards can lead to dangerous acts of defiance and can intensify efforts to acquire nuclear weapons. From a peace ethics point of view, this line of argument demands complete nuclear disarmament. Concrete steps towards this goal include stopping nuclear testing and ceasing production of fissile material for weapons purposes, establishing nuclear weapon-free zones and disposing completely of non-strategic nuclear weapons that date from the time of the Cold War.

And then comes “my” part:

(164) An alternative line of argument emphasizes that one must, even without explicitly threatening anyone, address potential threats—not least the threat posed by the increasing number of nuclear-armed states and by the danger that terrorist groups might also become equipped with weapons of mass destruction. To that extent, deterrence remains a valid principle. It is served by conventional and nuclear weapons, with nuclear weapons regarded as political and not as war-fighting weapons. The existence of such a potential is supposed to prevent a prospective adversary from attacking, blackmailing or putting pressure on others. This “prevention” is based on the attacker's awareness that in the case of the use of nuclear weapons he would have to expect unacceptable, incalculable damage. The risk of deterrence failing must also be responsibly thought through. But the dilemma would not be smaller if one were unilaterally to renounce adequately balancing the potential of an increasing number of nuclear powers. Rulers who are primarily interested in surviving and retaining power cannot necessarily be assumed to act irrationally. Even proponents of this line of argument do not deny the ethical postulate of nuclear disarmament, but they are convinced that even a world entirely free of nuclear weapons would be anything but stable, because nuclear weapons cannot be “un-invented.” From this perspective it is difficult to imagine how in the event of tensions the outbreak of a new, extremely destabilizing nuclear arms race for the new “first atomic bomb” could be prevented.

Personally I am quite proud to have anchored in this fundamental peace memorandum of the national Protestant Church a commonly understandable explanation of NATO's deterrence philosophy—leaving it to the reader to decide which approach is more realistic and commonsensical.

Now a few concluding thoughts on what should be reflected in the Strategic Concept.



It is of key significance to explain something that is clear to experts in a convincing way to policy makers and, simultaneously, to the public. Why simultaneously? Because many parliamentarians, for example, will not embrace what they might understand as right or inevitable if they think that they might be swimming against the stream.

This should start with a general reflection: It is of particular conceptual importance to develop a better common understanding among Allies about the role of military force as well as the legitimacy of the use or threat of military force, given the differing views on both sides of the Atlantic. Robert Kagan is not totally mistaken when he compares, because of its commitment to multilateralism and diplomacy, Europe with Venus, and, because of its less inhibited inclination to use military force, the United States with Mars. <sup>[15]</sup> In peace-ethical terms, but also in multilaterally oriented security policy, the use of military force is regarded as *ultima ratio*. But this is often interpreted in a misguided way, as shown in translations such as “last recourse.” What is meant is not the “last” instrument in a series of measures, but the ultimate, i.e. most extreme means, whose early (measured) employment, or at least credible demonstration, may prevent worse developments in the future. A striking example continues to be the shelling of Dubrovnik by Serb artillery in the autumn of 1991. Had the international community, the United Nations, or NATO for that matter, been in agreement, two sorties on this artillery, or even the convincing announcement that such sorties would be conducted, would have given the fate of the Western Balkans an entirely different turn. Instead, Milosevic was continually reassured that militarily he had nothing to fear. Years later, intervention became unavoidable, at a much higher price, while hundreds of thousands had meanwhile lost their lives and homes.

Such lessons need to be assessed among Allies and reflected in the Strategic Concept: Even preventive diplomacy needs a military backbone, and the “ultimate means” must always be demonstrably available. Excluding military options from the outset does not favor crisis management, dispute settlement and conflict prevention.

In that context the concept of deterrence needs to be redefined. It may be true that “suicide bombers cannot be deterred.” as the conventional argument about the supposed outdatedness of any deterrence strategy goes. But the regimes that support them want to survive and retain their power. They should not be expected to act irrationally. Also, the dangers in today’s world are not limited to terrorism. Threats may appear or re-appear, and it is advisable to “keep some powder dry” and explain this in a wholly unaggressive, non-confrontational way. Certainly this discussion should also include the aspect that the emphasis on “deterrence by punishment” might have to shift to “deterrence by denial” (of options) by using defensive means and a larger panoply of instruments, and thus making aggression, threat or blackmail less attractive.

Finally, the Strategic Concept should not duck the problem of prevention and preemption, but rather clear up the confusion of terms that reigns in this field—in the sense that prevention writ large is desirable, going to the root of disputes, crises and conflicts in a broad-based approach. This is the “broad concept of security” that NATO had already embraced in its 1991 Strategic Concept. Preemption is legal under international law in the face of an “imminent” and “overwhelming” attack (the famous Caroline criteria, formulated in 1841-1842). What is problematic is the “preventive” use of military force, “preventive war” in view of a presumed developing danger of attack.

This seems obvious, and should be clearly stated, but a more profound discussion of the problem shows that after the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington politicians have to assess the potentially apocalyptic consequences, should such attacks include weapons of mass destruction or “only” a radiological (“dirty”) bomb. Given such potentialities and the almost non-existent warning time, “self-defense” and “imminent” do not ring the same way as in the time of mainly conventional defense. Questions of legality and legitimacy form part of this debate.

In this reflection it becomes clear that deterrence must be retrieved from being identified predominantly with the nuclear aspects. There are all kinds of instruments available—economic, police, surveillance, judicial and political measures. The “appropriate mix” has to be explained as well as the “full spectrum.” Under the political measures I would also subsume public information steps exposing a state that is using threats or aggression of any kind. For example, I find some of my Russian friends rather embarrassed by the mention of cyber attacks on Estonia.

Indeed, how to convey and communicate deterrence messages is of the essence. Credibility and reassurance are the key categories here. And what apparently played a role in an earlier workshop cannot be underlined strongly enough: that the Alliance’s reputation gained or damaged in Afghanistan has a lot to do with its future deterrent power.

The public also needs to understand that the cheap statement that “suicide bombers cannot be deterred” says nothing about states that sponsor or sanction aggressive or terrorist acts and that may well be amenable to deterrent policy.

In the face of a swelling tide of antinuclear sentiments, thorough debate is required among Allies about the difference between a visionary goal and the means and steps to approach it as well as the realities and obstacles on the way. As an impetus for swifter reductions of nuclear stockpiles and as a bolster for the United States’ and the West’s credibility in insisting on non-proliferation the vision has its function. But it can easily create illusions in the public domain, exaggerated hopes and more opposition to NATO’s nuclear policy. And it makes harder the task of explaining to NATO member states’ publics the requirement to retain the means for deterrence as long as the vision is still a long-term goal on the horizon. Publics like to hear the first part of the message, but not what the U.S. President also said in Prague. Moreover, the task of explaining the difficulties of creating a nuclear-weapon-free world, such as monitoring and verification, is an unthankful one.

Furthermore, as said before, it must be explained in the public debate that a nuclear-weapon-free world might not be inherently stable because compliance would be difficult to ascertain and nuclear weapons cannot be de-invented so that a conflict or international tension could always refuel a nuclear arms race for the (again) first bomb.

If NATO is to maintain its minimum nuclear deterrence posture, it must, on the one hand, explicitly subscribe to a continuation of reducing nuclear stockpiles, preferably in a negotiated manner. At the same time, it would be important to reaffirm the political role of nuclear weapons and the principle of an intolerable and incalculable risk for an aggressor. The continuing need for “uncertainty in the mind of the aggressor,” at the heart of deterrence, leads to the reaffirmation that NATO will not establish a “no-first-use” policy, because it does not have a declared “first-use policy” either. But at the same time NATO should recant any warfighting option for nuclear weapons as alleged by critics and sometimes nourished by U.S. expert planning. In that context the Alliance must credibly explain how NATO’s three nuclear powers have taken—and continue to take—steps to fulfill their obligations from the Non-proliferation Treaty, but state that they, and particularly the U.S., are prepared to go further. At the same time the role of nuclear weapons in the hands of NATO powers vis-à-vis an increasing number of nuclear-armed states should be explained with self-confidence.

Other speakers have already said what is necessary about the need for a deepened understanding of the requirements of deterrence and about the relevance of the full spectrum of policy instruments from nuclear forces to conventional military assets and non-military capabilities. But it is worth while to underline the requirement for burden-, risk- and responsibility-sharing. As pointed out already in the workshop’s concept paper, the circumstances are changing: In an enlarged Alliance an increasingly smaller proportion of Allies is involved directly in the Alliance’s nuclear deterrence posture and opposition in some of the remaining member



states is growing. In the context of the indivisibility of Alliance security the future forms of “nuclear participation” clearly need to be addressed.

In any event, “the challenge of reconciling the continuing need for nuclear deterrence arrangements with the political imperative to pursue visible and substantive measures in nuclear arms control” (to quote the workshop’s concept paper again because it is a very fitting description of what is necessary) has become ever more urgent and must be taken seriously in the dialogue about these issues in order to produce consensual, solid and convincing statements in the Strategic Concept.

The nuclear section of the new Strategic Concept cannot be dealt with in a mere drafting process. Not all of what I have mentioned will eventually be included in the document, but a deepened dialogue among Allies is needed, leading to better understanding, among governments and in the publics, and genuine consensus. This is also true for the subjects and sections which are closely linked to nuclear policy and strategy: non-proliferation, missile defense, arms control and disarmament—perhaps even space.

## About the Author

Brigadier General Dr Klaus Wittmann served as a Bundeswehr officer for 42 years, during which he commanded a rocket artillery battalion and an armored brigade, studied history and political science, worked in politico-military affairs, and published widely. His last assignment until 2008 was as Director Academic Planning and Policy at the NATO Defense College, Rome. In January 1990 he was the initiator of NATO’s strategy reform after the fall of the Berlin Wall. He expressed strictly his own views in his statement, and it has been maintained in the somewhat personal way in which it was presented.

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